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SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR UNPROMPTED, CONTEXT-SENSITIVE QUERYING DURING A TELEVISION BROADCAST

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

RELATED APPLICATIONS

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The present application is related to and claims priority from U.S. provisional application no. 60/246,542, entitled "Systems and Methods for Viewer Trigger in Enhanced Television and Cable Operator Control over Enhanced Programming," filed November 7, 2000, with inventors Mai-lan Tomsen, Martin L. Behrens, and Armando P. Stettner, which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

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FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to the field of interactive television systems and, more particularly, to a system and method for unprompted, context-sensitive querying during a television broadcast.

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DESCRIPTION OF RELATED BACKGROUND ART

Traditionally, the field of broadcasting relates to the activity of radio and television stations. However, with the development of cable and satellite networks, as well as the Internet, the meaning of the term has expanded to include the distribution of any type of media to many recipients using any transport method. For example, television and radio broadcasts are currently

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being sent by cable networks, satellite networks, packet switched networks, telephone networks, and conventional electromagnetic transmission techniques, e.g., radio frequency (RF) signals, very high frequency (VHF) signals, and ultra high frequency (UHF) signals.

5 Video streams for a television broadcast typically include a sequence of video frames or images that combine to form a moving image. Each video frame is referred to as a raster and includes a plurality of scan lines transmitted and displayed sequentially.

10 Cathode ray tubes (CRTs), as used in nearly all televisions and computer monitors, require a small amount of time for the scanning circuitry to return to the top of the screen after displaying the last line at the bottom of the screen. Video signal standards recognize this fact by inserting a number of "blank" lines at the beginning of each new video frame, which form a vertical blanking interval (VBI). During the VBI, the need to transmit video frame
15 information is suspended and data can be encoded into the video stream, which can be decoded and extracted at the receiving end.

Video streams can be either analog or digital. Traditionally, television sets have displayed only analog video streams. However, digital televisions and digital video broadcasting techniques are growing in popularity.

20 With the development of various encoding algorithms, such as the Motion Picture Experts Group (MPEG) algorithm, digital video streams may be transmitted to, and displayed on, a variety of devices. Digital broadcasting algorithms typically divide the video stream into a sequence of data elements

called "packets." Each packet typically includes a header, which may be used to store information about the packet or the program to which it pertains.

Today, broadcast television and Internet technology is beginning to converge. In particular, access to the World Wide Web via Internet-enabled television systems is growing in popularity. However, conventional systems are not able to provide a true synthesis of broadcast and Internet media. In particular, conventional systems do not provide techniques for unprompted, context-sensitive querying for supplemental content related to a television broadcast. Supplemental content may include, for example, additional information about the television broadcast, images, streaming video, e-commerce opportunities, and the like.

Conventionally, the Advanced Television Enhancement Forum (ATVEF) standard provides a limited mechanism for obtaining supplemental content by embedding "triggers" in a television broadcast. Triggers allow content developers, broadcasters, or cable operators to insert prompts into the video stream when supplemental content is available to the viewer. This technique is described in more detail with respect to Figure 4.

Unfortunately, ATVEF requires broadcasters or cable operators to embed specific triggers into the television broadcast. This is undesirable for a number of reasons. First, like advertisements, triggers have the tendency to distract viewers from the television broadcast and may actually annoy viewers. Second, many viewers would prefer to obtain additional information about a broadcast or access a commercial opportunity at a time of their own choosing, not merely when the broadcaster has chosen to embed a trigger. Third, triggers are typically not customized to individual viewers, but are broadcast to all of the

viewers receiving a particular television program. As such, many triggers are never activated. Consequently, triggers consume valuable bandwidth that might be put to a more a productive use, such as the transmission of an electronic programming guide (EPG) or other useful information.

- 5 Accordingly, what is needed is a technique for unprompted, context-sensitive querying for supplemental content during a television broadcast. What is also needed is a technique for providing supplemental content related to a television broadcast that does not require a broadcaster or cable operator to embed specific triggers into the broadcast medium.

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SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention solves the foregoing problems and disadvantages by providing a system and method for unprompted, context-sensitive querying in an interactive television system.

5 In one aspect of the invention, a user initiates an unprompted, context-sensitive information request by pressing a specifically-designated button on a remote control device for an interactive television system. The information request includes, in one implementation, an identifier of the interactive television system, which is used to route a set of search results back to the user.

10 The information request may also include contextual information concerning the television program or segment thereof being viewed. For example, the contextual information may include one or more of (1) an indication of a channel being displayed by the interactive television system, (2) a time index, (3) an indication of a specific television program being viewed, and (4) one
15 or more keywords taken, for example, from close-captioning text associated with the television program.

 The information request is sent from the interactive television system to a content source maintained, for example, by a broadcaster or cable operator. A search engine within the content source uses the contextual
20 information from the information request to search the content source for supplemental content related to the television program being viewed. The output of the search engine is a set of search results comprising items of supplemental content related to the television broadcast.

 In one embodiment, the information request also include a set of
25 user preferences. The user preferences may be specified by the user or may be

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FIG. 1 is a schematic block diagram of a system for delivering television programs and supplemental content to a plurality of users;

FIG. 3 is a detailed schematic block diagram of a set top box;

FIG. 5 is a schematic block diagram of system for unprompted, context-sensitive querying;

FIG. 7 is a schematic block diagram of content source processing of an information request;

FIG. 9 is a schematic block diagram of a system for unprompted,
20 context-sensitive querying;

FIG. 11 is a flowchart of a method for initiating an unprompted, context-sensitive information request using an interactive television system.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Reference throughout this specification to “one embodiment” or “an embodiment” means that a particular feature, structure, or characteristic described in connection with the embodiment is included in at least one
5 embodiment of the present invention. Thus, the appearances of the phrases “in one embodiment” or “in an embodiment” in various places throughout this specification are not necessarily all referring to the same embodiment.

Furthermore, the particular features, structures, or characteristics
10 may be combined in any suitable manner in one or more embodiments. In the following description, numerous specific details are provided, such as examples of programming, user selections, network transactions, database queries, database structures, etc., to provide a thorough understanding of embodiments of the invention. One skilled in the relevant art will recognize, however, that the
15 invention can be practiced without one or more of the specific details, or with other methods, components, materials, etc. In other instances, well-known structures, materials, or operations are not shown or described in detail to avoid obscuring aspects of the invention.

Referring now to FIG. 1, there is shown a system 100 for delivering
20 television programs and supplemental content to a plurality of customers. In one implementation, the system 100 includes a broadband communication network 101, such as a cable network. However, other networks are contemplated, one particular example of which is a satellite network.

In one configuration, the system 100 includes a plurality of set top
25 boxes (STBs) 102 located, for instance, at customer homes. Generally, an STB

are received from a local CATV satellite downlink and packaged together for transmission to customer homes. In one configuration, the head-end 108 also functions as a Central Office (CO) in the telephone industry, routing video streams and other data to and from the various STB 102 devices serviced
5 thereby.

The network 101 is preferably coupled to one or more programming sources 112 for distributing primary content, such as television programs, to the STBs 102. Additionally, the network 101 is coupled to one or more supplemental content sources 114 (or simply "content sources 114"). As illustrated, the content
10 sources 114 may include or be in communication with data feeds 116, advertisement servers 118, images sources 120, streaming video sources 122, and e-commerce sites 124, each of which may provide various types of supplemental content during a television broadcast.

Additionally, the network 101 is coupled to the Internet 126 in one
15 embodiment. The Internet 126 is a "network of networks" and is well known to those skilled in the art. Communication over the Internet 126 is accomplished using standard protocols, such as TCP/IP (transmission control protocol/Internet protocol) and the like. In one embodiment, one or more content sources 114 may be accessible via the Internet 126.

Referring now to FIG. 2, there is shown an interactive television
20 system 200 according to an embodiment of the invention. The depicted system 200 includes an STB 102, a television 104, and a remote control 106. As noted above, the STB 102 is configured to send and receive video streams and other data to and from the network 101 via a head-end 108. In an alternate

provide direct, digital video output for televisions 104 equipped to receive the same.

In some implementations, the STB 102 may also include a storage device 310, such as a hard disk drive or the like. The storage device 310 may be
5 configured to record television broadcasts and provide personal video recorder (PVR) functionality, such as pausing "live" television, providing personalized networks, and the like.

The storage device 310 may also be used to store viewer preferences, parental lock settings, electronic programming guide (EPG) data,
10 programming preferences, passwords, e-mail messages, information requests, and the like. In one implementation, the storage device 310 also stores an operating system (OS) for the STB 102, such as Windows CE® or Linux®.

In various embodiments, a CPU 312 controls the operation of the STB 102, including the other components thereof, which are connected to the
15 CPU 312 via a bus 314. The CPU 312 may be embodied as a microcontroller, a microprocessor, a digital signal processor (DSP) or other device known in the art. As noted above, the CPU 312 may perform these and other operations based on control signals generated by the remote control 106 and transmitted to the receiver 212.

20 Of course, FIG. 3 illustrates only one possible configuration of the STB 102. Those skilled in the art will recognize that various other architectures and components may be provided within the scope of the invention.

Referring now to FIG. 4, there is shown a conventional system 400 that relies on triggers 402 to provide supplemental content 406 during a television
25 broadcast. As noted earlier, triggers 402 messages embedded by broadcasters,

content developers, and/or cable operators into the broadcast medium. Various trigger protocols are known in the art, one example of which is the Advanced Television Enhancement Forum (ATVEF) protocol.

In general, triggers 402 are a mechanism for alerting television viewers to incoming content enhancements, e.g. supplemental content 406. Triggers 402 are sent over the broadcast medium and contain information about enhancements that are available to the viewer. Among other information, a trigger 402 typically contains a standard Universal Resource Locator (URL) that defines the location of the enhanced content. ATVEF content may be located locally (possibly delivered over the broadcast network 101 and cached to a hard drive) or it may reside on the Internet, another public network, or a private network.

As illustrated in FIG. 4, when a trigger 402 is received, the STB 102 automatically generates a message 404 on the user's television 104 to alert the user that the supplemental content 406 is available. A user may activate the trigger 402 by pressing, for example, a specifically-designated button on a remote control (not shown), such as an "Info" button.

Activating the trigger 402 causes the supplemental content 406 to be displayed. The supplemental content 406 may be received with the trigger 402. Alternatively, the trigger 402 includes a link, such as a URL, for retrieving the supplemental content 406.

Although triggers 402 allow broadcasters and cable operators to provide supplemental content 406, not every user desires enhanced features all of the time. Triggers 402, like advertisements, often distract users from the television broadcast and may actually annoy some users. Further, the

supplemental content 406 is only available when triggers 402 are embedded in the broadcast. Users often prefer to obtain additional information about a broadcast or access a commercial opportunity on their own time schedule, not merely when the broadcaster has chosen to insert a trigger 402.

5 Furthermore, triggers 402 are typically sent to all of the viewers of the television broadcast. Accordingly, they cannot be customized for a particular user or context. For example, a particular user may only be interested in certain types of supplemental content 406, such as links related to the actors and actresses in the television program being viewed. However, a trigger-based
10 system does not conventionally allow for this type of personalization. Not only are triggers 402 not customized to individual users, they are often not customized to the content of the program being viewed.

Finally, triggers consume valuable bandwidth that might be put to a more productive use, such as the transmission of an electronic programming
15 guide (EPG) or other information. For the reasons discussed above, many triggers 402 are not activated, resulting in wasted bandwidth.

As an example, suppose a user is watching a news program discussing blight on geoducks and recommends that the viewers avoid them. The user has no idea what geoducks are and would like to obtain additional
20 information. However, unless the broadcaster anticipated the user's interest, he or she cannot obtain the information using a conventional, trigger-based system. Moreover, if a trigger 402 is received, it is likely unrelated to geoducks, and is more likely e-commerce opportunity, which can be distracting and annoying. If the user elects not to activate the trigger 402, the bandwidth used for transmitting
25 the trigger 402 was wasted.

FIG. 5 is a schematic block diagram of a system 500 for providing supplemental content 406 related to a television broadcast that resolves the above-described problems and disadvantages. As described more fully hereafter, the depicted system 500 allows a user to send an unprompted, context-sensitive request for supplemental content 406 related to the television program (or segment thereof) being viewed. As used herein, supplemental content 406 may include a wide variety of information types, such as news feeds, advertisements, images, streaming video, and the like. Additionally, supplemental content 406 may include information and mechanisms for completing an electronic transaction.

It should be recognized that the system 500 is not incompatible with the system 400 of FIG. 4. For example, ATVEF triggers 402 may still be embedded in the broadcast medium. However, the present invention allows a user to obtain supplemental content 406 related to the television broadcast without the necessity of an embedded trigger 402.

In one embodiment, a user presses a "FIND" 240 button or the like on the remote control 106, which results in an appropriate control signal being sent to the STB 102. Upon receiving the control signal, the STB 102 generates an information request 502. Unlike conventional systems, the request 502 is unprompted, e.g., is not made in response to an embedded trigger 402. The information request 502 is preferably transmitted upstream by the STB 102 to a content source 114, which is maintained, for example, by a broadcaster, content producer, cable operator (MSO), or the like.

In certain embodiments, a content source 114 may be hosted within a head-end 108. However, for simplicity, the following description assumes that

a head-end 108 and a content source 114 are separate entities, although the invention is not limited in this respect.

As described in greater detail below, the information request 502 contains contextual information from which the content source 114 may determine the television program (or segment thereof) being viewed. Based upon the contextual information, the content source 114 may search a database or the like and return a set of search results 504. In one embodiment, the set of search results 504 is a list of specific items of supplemental content 406 related to the television program (or segment thereof) being viewed. The list may include one or more links, such as URLs, identifying the stored location of the supplemental content 406. In an alternative embodiment, the search results 504 may actually include the supplemental content 406.

Referring now to FIG. 6, there is shown an exemplary format of an information request 502. While the information request 502 is depicted as including a number of different elements, it should be recognized that the request 502 may contain one or more of the illustrated elements.

In one configuration, the information request 502 includes an identifier 602 of the user's STB 102. The identifier 602 may be embodied in various forms, such as a media access control (MAC) address, an Internet protocol (IP) address, or another type of standard address known in the art. As described below, the content source 114 uses the identifier 602 to return the search results 504 to the correct STB 102.

In one embodiment, the information request 502 also includes contextual information 604 for indicating to the content source 114 which television program (or segment thereof) is being viewed. The contextual

information 604 may include, for example, a channel identifier 606, which indicates to the content source 114 which channel the user is presently viewing.

A channel identifier 606 is a useful where the content source 114 stores supplemental content 406 with a course granularity. For example, a
5 content source 114 may store items of supplemental content 406 applicable a television program as a whole, as opposed to discrete segments of the television program.

In one embodiment, the channel identifier 606 may be used to direct the information request 502 to a specific content source 114 related to the
10 television program being displayed. For example, each content source 114 may be affiliated with a single broadcast channel, such as the Discovery Channel, CNN, or the like. In alternative embodiments, one content source 114 may service a plurality of broadcast channels, in which case the channel identifier 606 is valuable in identifying the television program currently being viewed.

15 Where the content source 114 stores supplemental content 406 of a finer granularity (e.g., directed to discrete segments of television programs), a time index 608 may be supplied in the information request 502. The time index 608 indicates, for example, the time that the user pressed the "FIND" button 240 or the time that the request 502 was sent.

20 Based upon the time index 608, the content source 114 may identify specific supplemental content 406 related to a discrete segment of the television program, such as a brief news segment related to geoducks. Supplemental content may be indexed according to time with varying degrees of granularity, such as by the minute or the second. Thus, if the user presses the

“FIND” button during the geoducks news segment, supplemental content 406 pertaining to geoducks may be provided.

In alternative embodiments, a time index 608 is not sent with an information request 502. Rather, the content source 114 calculates a time index 608 based upon the time that the request 502 was received. In one embodiment, the content source 114 may take into account the amount of time required to transmit the request 502 from the STB 102 to the content source 114. Typically, this time is relatively small and may be disregarded. In some cases, however, the transmission time may be significant where the granularity of the supplemental content 406 stored for a particular television program is fine (e.g., measured in seconds rather than minutes).

In one implementation, the information request 502 contains an indication 610 of the specific television program being viewed. The indication 610 may be obtained, for example, from data encoded within the vertical blanking interval (VBI) of the television broadcast. Alternatively, the indication 610 may be obtained from electronic programming guide (EPG) data, which typically includes the name of the television program as well as other related data.

In the depicted embodiment, the request 502 may also include one or more keywords 612 obtained from closed-captioning text encoded with the television program. For example, when the “FIND” button 240 is pressed, the current page of closed-captioning text (and optionally one or more previous pages of text) may be transmitted along with the information request 502. Based upon the keywords 612 from the closed-captioning text, as described below, the content source 114 may search for supplemental content 406 related to the

television program being displayed, even when the content source provider did not anticipate the user's interest by specifically including such content 406.

An information request 502 may also include, in one embodiment, a number of user preferences 614. The user preferences 614 may indicate, for instance, the types of supplemental content 406 that the user wishes to receive. For example, the user may indicate that he or she wishes to receive only supplemental content from a particular provider, such as a broadcaster. Likewise, the user may indicate that he or she wishes to receive only certain types of supplemental content 406, such as supplemental content 406 related to the actors and actresses of the television program being viewed. Furthermore, a user may indicate a desire to exclude certain types of supplemental content 406, such as e-commerce opportunities or advertisements. Thus, a wide variety of user preferences 614 may be specified to limit or expand the supplemental content 406 available to the user in response to an information request 502.

The user preferences 614 may also be based on historically observed behavior of the user, rather than user selections. For example, the STB 102 may note that the user only views supplemental content 406 related to actors and actresses and updates the user preferences 614 accordingly. Thus, in one embodiment, the search results 504 returned by the content source 114 may only include items of supplemental content 406 related to actors and actresses.

FIG. 7 is an expanded block diagram of a content source 114 according to an embodiment of the invention. In one implementation, the content source 114 includes a search engine 702 which receives the contextual information 604 and the user preferences 614 (if any) from the information

request 502. The search engine 702 may be embodied as a database management system (DBMS), an Internet search engine, a metasearch engine, or other type of system or device for searching the content source 114 or the Internet 126 for supplemental content 406 satisfying the information request 502.

5 Thus, the search engine 702 of FIG. 7 should not be limited to any particular technology.

As previously described and further illustrated in FIG. 7, the supplemental content 406 may be indexed with various granularities. For example, the set of supplemental content 406a stores supplemental content 406
10 on a per program basis. Thus, an entire television program, such as X-Files, is associated with a single set of supplemental content 406a. By contrast, the set of supplemental content 406b is indexed with a finer granularity, such as specific items of supplemental content 406 for each minute of the television broadcast.

In one embodiment, sets of supplemental content 406b-d may be
15 provided by different sources, such as broadcasters, producers, or network operators. These sets of supplemental content 406b-d may be stored in separate searchable databases or locations. The search engine 702 may be configured, in one implementation, to search each of the different sets of supplemental content 406d-b in a prescribed order. Moreover, in one embodiment, a set of
20 supplemental content 406 from one provider, e.g., a cable operator, may supersede supplemental content 406 available from another provider, such as a content broadcaster. Thus, in response to an information request 502, a user would only receive the supplemental content 406 from the cable operator and be unaware of the supplemental content 406 available from the broadcaster.

for transmission to the user's STB 102, as identified by the STB identifier 602 in the information request 502.

In an alternative embodiment, the search results 504 are not filtered at the content source 114. Rather, the unfiltered search results 504 sent to the STB 102, after which the STB 102, itself, performs filtering based upon stored user preferences 614. In such an embodiment, there would be no need to send the user preferences 614 with the information request 502.

As shown in FIG. 8, the search results 504 are then displayed on the television 104 simultaneously with, or in place of, the television program 802 being viewed. As noted above, the search results 504 may be embodied as a list of items of supplemental content 406, which may take form of short descriptions of the items together with links (not shown) to the stored supplemental content 406. This may be accomplished, for example, using documents encoded in a markup language, such as the hypertext markup language (HTML).

In one embodiment, the search results 504 are displayed in a window that overlays part or all of the television program 802. In an alternative embodiment, however, the display area of the television 104 may be split between the television program 802 and the search results 504, such that both are simultaneously visible.

The items of supplemental content 406 are preferably selectable by the user. For example, referring also the FIG. 9, the user may select one of the items of supplemental content 406 by moving a selection rectangle 804 up and down in the search results 504 by means of the up and down arrow buttons 228, 230 of the remote control 106. When the selection rectangle 804 is placed over

the desired item of supplemental content 406, the user may indicate his or her selection by pressing a "OK" button 232 or the like.

In one embodiment, pressing the "OK" button 232 causes a selection indicator 902 to be sent to the content source 114 for indicating the user's selection. The selection indicator 902 may be embodied as a link, such as a URL, or other indication of the selected item of supplemental content 406. In response to the selection indicator 902, the content source 114 sends the supplemental content 406 to the STB 102 for display on the television 104.

The selected supplemental content 406 may not always be stored at the content source 114. For example, the supplemental content 406 may have been located in response to a search of the Internet 126. Accordingly, in one embodiment, the selection indicator 902 comprises a URL that references the supplemental content 406 within the Internet 126. The supplemental content 406 may be retrieved by the STB 102 using conventional protocols, such as the hypertext transfer protocol (HTTP), the file transfer protocol (FTP), or the like.

As previously noted, the supplemental content 406 may be sent with the search results 504, in certain embodiments, and cached within the storage device 310. This may occur, for example, where the items of supplemental content 406 are relatively small. In such an embodiment, there is no need to send a selection indicator 902 to a content source 114 or the Internet 126. Rather, the selected supplemental content 406 may be retrieved from storage device 310 and displayed on the television 104.

In one embodiment, as shown in FIG. 10, the full-size display of the television program 802 shrinks in an "animated" fashion (i.e. with visible motion to a viewer) to occupy a reduced-size area of the television 104, while the display of

the supplemental content 406 occupies the remainder of the screen. This is advantageous since the user can still watch the television program 802, while the text of the supplemental content 406 (if any) is made as large as possible to be readable on the television 104.

5 Preferably, the user may interact with the displayed supplemental content 406, such as following links to display additional supplemental content 406, completing an electronic transaction, and the like. In one embodiment, pressing a "return" or "switch" button (not shown) on the remote control 106 allows the user to enlarge the broadcast program 802 to its original size,
10 overlaying the supplemental content 406.

Referring now to FIG. 11, there is shown a flowchart of a method 1100 for unprompted, context-sensitive querying in an interactive television system 200. The method 1100 begins, in one embodiment, when the viewer presses 1102 a "FIND" button 240 on a remote control 106 while watching a
15 television program 802. In response, an STB 102 generates 1104 an information request 502 containing, in one embodiment, contextual information 604 pertaining to the television program 802 (or segment thereof) being viewed, and transmits the same to a supplemental content source 114.

In one embodiment, the content source 114 searches 1106 for
20 related supplemental content 406 based on the contextual information 604 in the information request 502. If related supplemental content 406 is found at the content source 114 (e.g., search results 504), the content source 114 filters 1110 the set of search results 504 according to the user preferences 614 and/or user profile 704. If, however, related supplemental content 406 is not found 1108, the
25 Internet 126 is searched 1112 for related supplemental content 406, after which a

set of search results 504 from the Internet-based search is likewise filtered 1110 according to user preferences 614 or user profile 704.

Next, the content source 114 transmits 1114 the search results 504 to the user's STB 102, which displays 1116 the search results 504 on the television 104. A user selects 1118 an item of supplemental content 406 from the search results 504. Thereafter, the STB 102 transmits 1120 an indication 902 of the selection to the content source 114, which sends 1122 the selected supplemental content 406 to the STB 102. Finally, the STB 102 displays 1124 the selected supplemental content 406 on the television 104, after which the method 1100 is complete.

Based on the foregoing, the present invention offers numerous advantages not available in conventional approaches. For example, the present invention allows the user to initiate an unprompted, context-sensitive request 502 for supplemental content 406 at any time, even if the broadcaster or cable operator did not anticipate the user's interest. In addition, the present invention allows for a high degree of personalization, unlike conventional, trigger-based approaches.

While specific embodiments and applications of the present invention have been illustrated and described, it is to be understood that the invention is not limited to the precise configuration and components disclosed herein. Various modifications, changes, and variations which will be apparent to those skilled in the art may be made in the arrangement, operation, and details of the methods and systems of the present invention disclosed herein without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention.